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ABSTRACT

As long as new programs based upon the compensatory model are advocated, and demands are made that the participants change to fit the programs, members of minority cultures will suffer. Suitable alternates to existing school admissions criteria would stop defining students in terms of deficiencies, instead focusing upon the positive aspects of each student's experiences and integrating them into the curriculum. Further, admissions standards would be free of any taint of middle-class superiority. They would genuinely accept cultural diversity, building upon positive elements in the community involved. They would respect the community's unique aspirations, priorities, and values and would make the resources of the university available to minority individuals and communities, assisting them to develop positive solutions to their particular problems. They would contain no "a priori" assumptions about what skills are necessary to meet the needs of those minority communities. The author states that compensatory education is wrong, both morally and practically--morally, because it destroys children and cultures for no justifiable reason, and practically, because it wastes the potential productivity of talented people who are alienated by an inadequate educational system. (Author/JM)

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# COMPENSATORY EDUCATION - A CALCULATED COP-OUT

An address presented to the 1970 Convention of the Wisconsin Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, October 16, 1970, by

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We Americans are accustomed to congratulating ourselves for offering a democratic education to children of all the diverse cultures which are represented in our society. Unquestionably, we do require that every black and brown and yellow child attend school for at least ten years, and recently we have even begun to require that they sit side by side with white children. But we have not begun to look critically enough at what kind of education those children receive, and to evaluate how well it relates to the needs of minority communities. I want to suggest to you today that we have failed to examine the social and educational assumptions underlying the treatment of minority students. Because it is what has always been done, we have in education perpetuated a kind of cultural imperialism in the guise of the melting-pot democracy. I am referring to the set of assumptions about the needs of non middle class, non white children known as compensatory education.

The compensatory education model, simply stated, holds that since school curricula and policies have served the needs of the majority of the people for many years, they are basically sound and ought not be changed. If black children, for instance, cannot learn well in the public schools, it is they who are at fault and they who must change. The schools are willing to help these 'culturally deprived' children through programs which are intended to compensate for an inadequate home environment.

The compensatory notion is an old one in this country. It has for a century or more accompanied attitudes of white racism, ethnocentric chauvinism, and superiority. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, for instance, runs boarding schools based on the assumption that Indians have no culture, or at best a backward one, and that the best education for an Indian child is to uproot his savage customs and to train him in white middle class cultural values. As for the Indians, so has it been for eastern Europeans, blacks, Spanish-Americans, and in fact every culturally-different group in America, except where they have been numerous and powerful enough to control the schools.

The compensatory concept, then, is not new. But what makes it so essential for us to re-examine its implications <u>today</u> is that it has never before been funded so extensively. As a result of billions of dollars of Federal money, compensatory education has become a sweeping phenomenon in our society. Whole federal agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity have been created in the compensatory mold; programs conceived in that model affect every educational institution from Headstart kindergartens to the University.

And, I am convinced that compensatory education is wrong, both morally and practically. Morally, because it destroys children and cultures for no justifiable reason, and practically, because it wastes the potential productivity of talented people who are alienated by an educational system which insults and confuses them.

To explain more fully why I believe the compensatory model is wrong, let me outline briefly the chief assumptions underlying it.

1. It assumes that in American society there is a norm in values and aspirations which can be described, which is just, and which most people do - and should - agree upon. A chief function of education is to indoctrinate and assimilate those who do not share that dominant culture.

2. It assumes, further, that persons failing to meet this norm are deficient. It does not recognize the possibility - the likelihood - that such people have had meaningful prior experiences in their own communities. To the extent that they deviate from the norm, they lack a culture.

3. Consequently, compensatory education transmits negative messages regarding the worth of individuals and communities. What is being compensated for? The entire range of experiences which the student brings from his own culture is ignored at best, or at worst labeled inferior.

4. Compensatory education further shortchanges the student by assuming that, by and large, he can only be brought up to the norm, never that he might exceet it, that his different cultural experience might be in some ways richer than that of white Anglo Saxon Protestants. Testing methods which reflect WASP values confirm this belief, and discriminate systematically against students from different cultures.

5. Compensatory education fails to recognize that educational programs in public schools and universities were never designed with the needs of Asian, Black, Spanish speaking, or Indian minorities in mind. Proponents of compensatory education who argue that such a monocultural, middle-class oriented education is essential to compete successfully in contemporary society, fail to realize that the life such students will lead may require very different skills and experiences. The situation in British Commonwealth nations provides an instructive analogy. Overwhelmingly rural nations like Kenya have adopted almost unchanged the classical British grammar school curriculum for their secondary schools, preparing students in English literature and history because the colonial culture is still assumed to be somehow superior. Such an education allows a few students completing it to enter universities, but it contributes nothing to the quality of the village life led by most of its graduates.

Looking at that list of compensatory assumptions, it is difficult to determine who is more deprived - minority students or WASP educators. One team of educators studying the problem observes that:

> "urban educators are isolated from the cultural and social milieu of their pupils...knowing little of their pupil's life and terrified or appalled by what they do discover, they justify their avoidance with a 'vacuum ideology' of cultural deficiency and deprivation which ignores or derogates the values and knowledge that the pupils have acquired in their homes and neighborhoods."

What happens to people who are the victims of this educational ideology? In city elementary schools for instance, teachers from narrow middle-class backgrounds often confront poor non-white children and, ignoring the skills and experiences which a ghetto child must acquire in order to survive, they teach a happy Dick and Jane world of material goods and values about which their students know nothing. The teachers blame the children for their own failure to teach; branded failures in the primary grades, the children become victims of a self fulfilling prophecy whereby teachers expect little of them, and cease to challenge them. Hence, by the fourth grade, a staggering number exhibit symptoms of alienation, withdrawal, and rejection of formal schooling in favor of a street education which teaches them skills immediately relevant to their lives. Chicago's Blackstone Rangers are known to advise their young members to sleep in school for self-protection, because the alternative they see is to accept the school's view of them as inadequate failures. Those who succeed on the school's terms often do so at severe psychological cost, since to do so implies rejecting everything positive in their lives at home and on the streets because the school sees those experiences as negative. They emerge disturbed, cut off from both minority and majority culture, divided against themselves. The only minority groups which have escaped this kind of cultural massacre have been those bringing to this country strong, intact traditions which they have transmitted to their children in schools of their own. This has been true notably of Chinese-Americans. A study of schools with large populations of Mexican-Americans, Indians, and Chinese-Americans teaching on the compensatory model revealed that the Mexican and Indian children suffered early alienation and high failure rates, while the Chinese children did well. The chief difference was that the Chinese children went to special Chinese schools after school to study their own culture and language. This positive education protected them against the negative self-image fostered in public schools, and while their less fortunate classmates received little or no education, they benefitted from a bi-cultural education which allowed them to succeed in their own community and in the majority culture as well.

The shocking dropout rates for non-whites in public schools are the clearest indictment of the compensatory model. Far behind their grade level by the time they reach high school, these students may be placed in remedial classes, but there they are merely presented with heavier doses of what they already rejected, or were unable to comprehend, in the regular curriculum. They see themselves as failures, and see no utility in prolonging a negative, insulting, and pointless experience.

Those who retain sufficient motivation to consider college find the compensatory system awaiting them with new snares. If public schools are

complacent about perpetuating existing curricula and policies, universities are positively smug in their acceptance of the ethnocentric middle-class status quo, this time masquerading as "maintaining university standards," or sometimes, "preserving the liberal arts education" or "commitment to excellence." What has always been done seldom requires justification; further, there are many vested interests in maintaining the status quo; the professors who do not wish to re-think their courses, who argue that what they know is all that should be taught and the way they learned is the only way to learn, the administrators who believe that only people like themselves belong in a university. Thus, the Graduate Record Exam excludes talented students from inferior schools, and the Grade Point Average excludes talented community leaders with considerable success in the real world despite poor academic records in high school or college. Thus it is that the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has only 100 Spanish speaking students out of 20,000, a ratio of 1 to 200, despite an overall population ratio of one to thirty-five (35). Many of those 100 were enrolled in an uninspired compensatory language arts program which treated them as intellectual inferiors who had to be raised to acceptable university performance levels. Thus it is that one of the most talented doctoral candidates in the School of Education, who has earned A's in his first semester in residence, and who is an acknowledged leader in the black community, was threatened recently with exclusion from the program because his G.R.E. scores fell below an arbitrary cutoff point.

The challenge for universities is clear and admission officers and registrars will be centrally involved in meeting this challenge. Reliable new criteria free of cultural bias must be developed to identify talented students from diverse cultures without discrimination, and alternatives to compensatory education programs must be found.

Suitable alternatives, it seems to me, would exhibit several positive characteristics. First, they would stop defining students in terms of deficiencies, instead focusing upon the positive aspects of each student's experiences, and integrating it into the curriculum. Further, they would be free of any taint of middle-class superiority. They would genuinely accept cultural diversity, building upon positive elements in the community involved. They would respect the community's unique aspirations, priorities, and values, and would make the resources of the university available to minority individuals and communities, assisting them to develop positive solutions to their particular problems. They would contain no a-priori assumptions about what skills are necessary to meet the needs of those minority communities.

Such a program is no remote ideal. In the School of Education, for example, a Bachelor's of Science Program in Community Education is now being developed which meets those criteria. Indigenous community leaders already deeply involved in educational activites outside the public schools will enter this program at a level commensurate with their demonstrated skills and will learn the additional specific educational skills which they require to design creative solutions to real educational problems in their communities. Their liberal arts studies will be a mutual exploration with their professors of how the skills of each discipline can be applied to the problems the students wish to confront.

Programs like this one build upon the student's unique experiences rather than denying them. They select students on the rigorous criterion of actual practical achievement, rather than upon discriminatory and unreliable tests predicting probable academic performance. They respond to real community needs, and are thus directly relevant to the needs of students planning to live and work in the community.

In short, then, as long as we advocate new programs based upon the compensatory model, we are insisting that the people change to fit the program--even though it was clearly not designed with them in mind. Until we change our programs to capitalize upon positive experiences of minority people, we are copping out. No matter what the rhetoric, it is still a cop-out and, unfortunately, a calculated one. Calculated because we <u>can</u> change our programs once we reject the compensatory model and search for new models. That, I believe, is how a college or university remains contemporary and retains its educational integrity.